

SNS DEMOCRACY  
COUNCIL REPORT 2021:  
*Polarization in Sweden*

---

*Henrik Oscarsson*  
*Torbjörn Bergman*  
*Annika Bergström*  
*Johan Hellström*

---

# Summary

IN RECENT YEARS, narratives about an increasingly acrimonious and divided society have gained traction in Sweden's public debate. The inspiration for these narratives originates largely from international events and trends such as Brexit, Donald Trump's presidency, the dismantling of democratic institutions, and the success of authoritarian or populist ideas and movements. In Sweden, we are often told that we see a new political landscape emerging that is dramatically altering the pre-conditions for party politics and parliamentarianism.

But is our current situation actually all that polarized? To answer this question, we carried out a systematic survey and analysis of how the level of polarization has changed in Sweden. We carefully studied developments as far back in time as possible, using a wide range of different measures and data such as parliamentary records, party platforms, and questionnaires aimed at voters and elected representatives. The goal is to offer the broadest possible analysis of the level of polarization and how it has changed over time. In some instances, we have also been able to compare polarization in Sweden with developments in other countries.

Increasing interest in the phenomenon of polarization is also evident in current research as the body of literature on polarization is expanding rapidly. We have done our best to present an overall picture of the current research in this area. However, the increased popularity of the term »polarization« has resulted in lower linguistic precision with regard to how it is used. We argue that it is crucial to carefully define what polarization refers to before drawing any conclusions. Our point of departure is how the term has been used in classic political science research. Hence, the focus of our analyses is on *ideological polarization* among some of the most important stakeholders in a democracy: citizens, parties, elected representatives, and the media. We also use other analytical

tools to distinguish between different types of polarization – tools that serve as the basis for empirically analyzing different aspects of polarization, such as the degree of *partisan sorting*, *presence of extremist parties and opinions*, and so-called *affective polarization*.

## Polarization of political parties

Analyzing how polarization increases or decreases over time is based on studying the positions of political parties along meaningful ideological dimensions. We focus on two conflicts: a classic left–right dimension and an emerging cultural values dimension. As different kinds of data present these developments differently, it is hard to provide a simple summary. Our studies of the election platforms presented by the parties – what they themselves say they want to do – and statements made by party representatives in relation to elections – indicate unchanged or *reduced* polarization along the left–right dimension but *increased* polarization along a cultural values dimension.

In the last four or five decades, the perceptions of voters and members of parliament regarding the political distance between parties indicate that Sweden has exhibited a remarkably high level of polarization with little variation. However, recently (i.e., between the 2014 and 2018 elections), we note a further polarization along the left–right dimension. The distances between positions of the green/center-left parties and the center-right parties – as well as between the parties making up the former center-right Alliance – are increasing, at the same time as the Sweden Democrats are growing. As the cultural values dimension is becoming increasingly important, we see signs of increased ideological distance here as well: in terms of sheltering refugees, some parties have become more generous (the Left Party, the Green Party and the Center Party) while other parties have become more restrictive (the Moderates, the Christian Democrats and the Liberals). Experts analyzing the positions of the parties essentially confirm a similar development: only small changes in Sweden’s still highly-polarized party system along the left–right dimension, but a clear, increased polarization along the cultural values dimension, especially after 2010.

One might interpret the results of our analyses of polarization in the Swedish party system as indicating that Sweden could be experiencing the beginning of a trend toward increased polarization. However, none of these developments are particularly dramatic from a historical perspective. Furthermore, the polarization we measure is at levels that previously characterized Swedish politics.

## Polarization of parliament

A parliamentary democracy involves a civilized battle between conflicting interests. We determine the level of polarization in the Swedish parliament by analyzing factors such as the behavior of the government and the opposition as well as the language used in parliamentary debates. The results show a somewhat higher level of conflict, which is primarily explained by a new parliamentary situation rather than increasing ideological distance between parties and elected representatives. Following the Alliance governments of 2006–2014, we see new voting patterns in parliament, more parliamentary resolutions that go against the government, and a more negative tone in parliamentary debates. This development is a consequence of the Social Democrats losing their dominant position, the large parties having become more equal in size, and Sweden having a minority government with weak parliamentary support since 2014.

In terms of policy, a shift has taken place from debates on Sweden's national profile in a globalized and Europeanized world to debates on migration and integration. Relations between the Sweden Democrats and the other parties have dominated Swedish politics during the past decade. A growing party adopting a clear outsider position in a new conflict dimension has resulted in more ideological repudiations, more visible conflicts between government and opposition, and the use of somewhat more heated language. We see increasing polarization, albeit not necessarily in the form of increased ideological distance, but rather in the form of affect and partisan (re)sorting.

## Polarization of media

When it comes to news media in Sweden, outlets have actually become less polarized in the past few decades. As a result of economic crises, digitalization, and increased competition, many newsrooms have been downsized or closed down altogether. Media ownership has also become more concentrated. Journalists as a group have undergone a process of increased professionalism, which has resulted in the profession gaining a more homogeneous identity. The political content across news outlets has become more homogenous and less ideologically oriented. There has also been a rise in the number of »alternative« news sources alongside established news sources. To some extent these new »alternative« channels are more ideologically diverse, but we can't, based on existing knowledge, establish the character of potential divergence or whether there is a growing gap. However, even though we see increased ideological pluralism in the publication of

political content, there are so far no signs that the public's news consumption is about to change in a way that would signal polarization. Swedes have a versatile and rich media diet. Established news media enjoy a dominant position and only exhibit moderate ideological variation. However, it remains difficult to see increased divergence or sorting at the systemic level in the public's news consumption or in the news media – factors identified in research as playing a key role in terms of increasing partisan sorting and affective polarization in a society. In other words, it is hard to imagine a one-sided, selective use of news based on specific ideological identities in Sweden.

## Polarization of citizens

The level of ideological polarization among citizens has historically stayed at a high level with only small variations. It is not possible to identify any persistent trends over time, as periods of depolarization have been followed by periods of polarization. Overall, the movements have been small. Essentially, the distribution of opinions and values in the electorate is characterized by stability over longer periods of time. Voters do not have more intense or more diversified views on important political issues.

The left–right polarization of the electorate is not at a remarkably high level today compared to previous periods. What is new is the emergence of recent and clear signs of increased partisan sorting on issues not involving classic conflicts related to the distribution of income and wealth. The emergence of the cultural values dimension adds an additional instance of sorting – primarily in relation to issues such as migration, multicultural issues, and refugee policies – without thereby diminishing the importance of the classic left–right conflict. Simultaneously with this development, we see a small increase in so-called affective polarization. Today, voters have stronger antipathies and sympathies for political parties compared to a decade or two ago. From a historical perspective, the levels of polarization in 2018 can be compared to other intense periods in Swedish politics, such as the end of the 1970s.

## A high level of polarization – a normal condition

Ideological polarization is essential for a vibrant democracy. Pluralism – meaning that there are meaningful differences between political alternatives – is inherent in the very definition of democracy. Our analyses clearly show that ideological polarization in Sweden has been at a high level for a long time

and has actually not fluctuated all that much from this high level. In other words, a high level of polarization has been a normal condition in Swedish democracy.

From a more long-term perspective and on the basis of systematic empirical observations, the time we live in today does not appear to be all that ideologically polarized. On the contrary, we can conclude that our democratic system has succeeded in managing deep social conflicts and a high level of polarization for a long time.

Differences in terms of values related to the classic left-right dimension remain significant and continue to play an important role in structuring political behavior among parties, politicians, citizens, and the media. More recent signs of increased ideological polarization, partisan sorting, and affective polarization are rather linked to emerging conflicts related to cultural values. It's possible that we are currently seeing the beginning of a clearer trend toward increased political polarization. Obviously, we are unable to determine whether this is the case unless we continue to systematically measure the level of polarization.

So, are there any signs that the level of political polarization in Sweden could become systemic; that is, so high that it threatens to paralyze democratic conversations or processes? An indication of this relates to the somewhat higher level of affective polarization and the increasing frequency of threats and hatred voiced against politicians and officials. These signs naturally need to be taken very seriously. Nevertheless, we think that the answer is no. A large number of factors needed for a negative spiral to move toward systemic polarization – similar to the one we have seen in the United States – do not exist in Sweden. We have a fundamentally consensual political culture, a multi-party system with proportional elections, and a tradition of popular education and public service media having created a large appetite for the consumption of political news, and capable citizens who are increasingly adopting a more independent position vis-à-vis political parties.

The path to unhealthy levels of political polarization goes through increased social sorting into distinct groups, creating strong partisan or ideological identities and increased hostility between supporters of different political camps. Although such phenomena may be the result of normal political processes, they risk resulting in self-reinforcing negative spirals that are difficult to bring to a halt. In order to avoid such developments in the future, we need to protect the things that have enabled Sweden's representative democracy to cope with historically high levels of political polarization. We believe that the behavior of elite actors, such as opinion leaders and political representatives, is absolutely crucial. For opportunistic elite actors and opinion leaders in an environment characterized by a fierce competition for attention, it may be tempting

to peddle unnuanced narratives, demonize opponents and their supporters, and exhibit a lack of respect for democratic processes. In such a reality, a number of incentives are needed that reward long-term responsibility and counteract temptations to score short-term political points.

## About the authors

*Henrik Oscarsson*, Professor of Political Science, University of Gothenburg

*Torbjörn Bergman*, Professor of Political Science, Umeå University

*Annika Bergström*, Professor of Journalism, Media and Communication, University of Gothenburg

*Johan Hellström*, Associate Professor of Political Science, Umeå University